



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

GIOTTO'S FIRST BIBLICAL SUBJECT IN THE ARENA CHAPEL

As one enters the Arena Chapel at Padua the most prominent fresco is that which adorns the triumphal arch immediately above the Annunciation. It represents a celestial potentate enthroned and surrounded by hovering angels, four of whom are in a more distinct attitude of attention (Fig. 1). This delightful composition, in the swaying lines of which Giotto anticipates the later perfections of Fra Angelico, has not received the attention to which both by intrinsic beauty and topical importance it is entitled. Ruskin in his essay for the Arundel Society, published in 1854, Crowe and Cavalcaselle,¹ Thode,² Broussolle,³ Dobbert,⁴ Pératé,⁵ and Sirén⁶ were content with the title Christ surrounded by Angels. Schnaase-Dobbert,⁷ Moschetti,⁸ Bayet,⁹ and others have adopted the more satisfactory designation God the Father surrounded by Angels. But this does not account for the prominence given to the composition in a scheme that is severely logical. Adolfo Venturi¹⁰ first perceived the fact that this fresco, being the pendant of the great Last Judgment on the entrance wall, must be the prologue of a scheme of which the Last Judgment is the epilogue. And further, noting that the figure who stands at God's left hand is identical with the Archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation below, Venturi interpreted the subject correctly as God despatching Gabriel to announce the Incarnation to the

¹ Hutton, Ed. I, p. 229.

² *Giotto*, Leipzig, 1899, p. 106.

³ *Les Fresques de l'Arena*, Paris, 1905, p. 7.

⁴ Dohme, *Kunst u. Künstler*, Italien, I, p. 19.

⁵ Michel, *Histoire de l'Art*, II, p. 799.

⁶ *Giotto*, Stockholm, 1906, p. 49.

⁷ *Allge. Gesch. d. Kunst* (1876), vol. V, p. 365.

⁸ *La Cappella degli Scrovegni*, Florence, 1904, p. 54.

⁹ *Giotto*, Paris, 1907, p. 68. ¹⁰ *Storia de l'Arte Italiana*, V, 323.

elect Virgin. Thus the first subject in the Arena Chapel is God decreeing the Incarnation, the last the final act of judgment and redemption. No more appropriate preface and sequel to the life of Christ and the Virgin as depicted in the

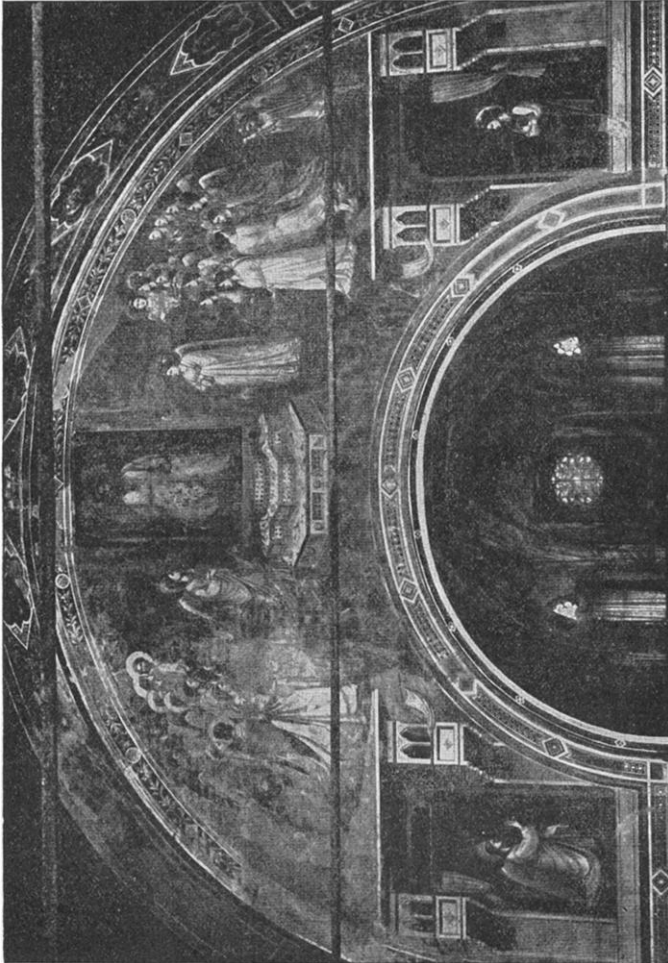


FIGURE 1. — GIOTTO'S FIRST BIBLICAL SUBJECT IN THE ARENA CHAPEL.

Arena Chapel could be imagined, and Venturi's interpretation seems definitive. It is confirmed by the Gospel narrative, Luke 1, 26, 27, "And in the sixth month the Angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to

a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the Virgin's name was Mary." This subject, though quite rare in art, exists. Emile Mâle notes it in an early fifteenth century manuscript illumination. My friend Professor Keyes of Dartmouth has kindly reported an amplified version of the theme in the famous tenth century homilies of the monk Jacobus. This Greek preacher ventures to put a considerable speech in the mouth of the Almighty which may be read in Rohault de Fleury's French translation.¹ There is, however, no reason to suppose that the subject was ever common or that Giotto followed any immediate iconographic original.

Study of this charming picture of a celestial court long ago convinced me that Giotto's pictorial amplification of the theme was not merely decorative in intention, nor to be explained by the brief words of Luke's Gospel. It seemed likely to me that the subject was based on a literary source, and it was natural to seek first in the famous devotional text which Giotto is known to have followed elsewhere in the Chapel, the "Meditations on the Life of Christ"² often, but apparently erroneously, attributed to the great Franciscan saint, Bonaventura.

The first chapter of the *Meditations* describes the intercession of the angels for mankind. (*De sollicita pro nobis intercessione Angelorum.*) Several angels prostrate themselves before the Most High, reminding him that man has lain long in sin and misery and begging that a means of salvation be found. The case is argued by Truth and Righteousness against man, by Mercy and Peace in his favor. The gentler Virtues finally prevail over the sterner. According to the prophecy of David (Psalm 84, Vulgate version), Mercy and Truth meet together, Righteousness and Peace kiss each other. The celestial court closes with the despatch of Gabriel to Nazareth after long instructions from God. The author of the *Meditations* alleges the authority of St. Bernard (Homily X, Concerning the

¹ *La Sainte Vierge*, I, p. 430. The miniature is described as follows: Trois personnages assis sur un même trône et représentant probablement la très sainte Trinité environnée d'anges, d'archanges et de seraphins. Au bas l'archange reçoit l'ordre, à gauche il part en volant. The recent Vatican publication of these Homilies is not accessible to me.

² I have used the Venice edition of Bonaventura, *Opera Omnia*, 1756. The *Meditationes Vitae Christi* are in the 12th tome, pp. 380 ff.

Annunciation), and Emile Mâle,¹ who has paraphrased this scene and very interestingly traced its influence upon French miniatures and dramatic mysteries of the fifteenth century, accepts the statement. There is, however, no such scene in St. Bernard's famous Homily on the Annunciation, and so far as the fairly complete index in the Migne edition serves, the audacious conceit of transferring the initiative for human salvation from God to the Angels seems never to have been entertained by the great Cistercian. I suspect St. Bernard is cited in the loose mediaeval fashion simply as a notable authority on the cult of the Virgin. Possibly the author of the *Meditations* squared his eminently heterodox notion with Divine omniscience by the general statement that "the fulness of time had come."

However that be, in this description of a celestial court preparing the way for the Annunciation we surely have the literary source of Giotto's first fresco in the Arena Chapel. Even in the present half-effaced condition of the painting it seems safe to say that Mercy and Peace, Truth and Righteousness are absent. The four most prominent figures — two near the throne; two at the front of the angel choirs — are most obviously to be explained as the four archangels. Unlike the Northern miniaturists cited by Mâle, Giotto avoids the fantastic personification of his original text and treats the subject concretely and explicably as a celestial audience with God speaking the word which Gabriel is to carry to Mary at Nazareth. The only earlier pictorial version of such a theme, that contained in the Homilies of Jacobus, represented the three persons of the Trinity seated together on a throne, and for that, as for other evident reasons, cannot be regarded as Giotto's original. It appears that, as was his usual practice, Giotto read carefully the text he was illustrating and selected from it those features which seemed most significant and most pictorial.

¹ *L'Art Religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France*. Paris, 1908, pp. 21 ff. M. Mâle gives a complete illustration of Bonaventura's scene from a late fifteenth century Ms. of the Golden Legend, Ms. français No. 244, Bibliothèque Nationale. He cites as an earlier incipient version, a miniature of Gabriel kneeling before God in the Breviary of the Duke of Bedford, 1450. Ms. lat. 17, 294, Bibl. Nat. His other examples are later. In fact, the "*Meditations*" seem to have arrived late in the North. Henry Thode in *Franz von Assisi* has cursorily analyzed the *Meditations*, omitting, however, this scene and its significance.

Giotto's seems to be the only instance of this theme being used in Italy, and this is another reason for supposing that he took it directly from that highly fanciful and by no means orthodox tract, the *Meditations*. The swelling current of Mariolatry willingly let the conceit of a celestial audit sink into a perhaps deserved oblivion. The blessed Virgin herself so fully engrossed men's interest and devotion that no one felt any curiosity as to what may have preceded the fateful words *Ave Maria, gratia plena*, even though such antecedents lay in the eternal purposes of God himself.

FRANK J. MATHER, JR.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY,
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY.